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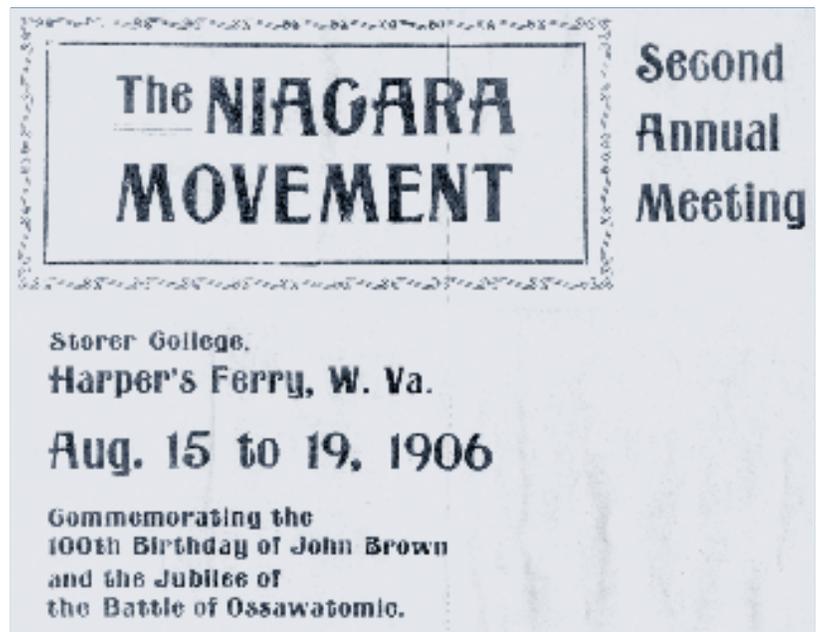
Harpers Ferry and the Niagara Movement

“... we talked some of the plainest English that had been given voice to by black men in America.”

These words by Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois described the 1906 Niagara Conference held in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Strong sentiments expressed by an outspoken leader, yet all but forgotten, or worse, never known. The historic meeting of the Niagara Movement in 1906 has, through the years, been overshadowed by later, perhaps, more successful movements in the area of civil rights. This fact, however, does not and should not diminish its importance in the pages of history. Harpers Ferry National Historical Park didn't include the Niagara Movement in its interpretation until about five years ago. Today, history of the Niagara Movement is shared through interpretive tours, presentations, and exhibits. A temporary exhibit has been on display since 1994 and a permanent space for this exhibit has been chosen. The opening is targeted for August 1996. So five years later, after additional research and on the eve of the 90th anniversary celebration, Harpers Ferry NHP has come a long way toward uncovering and providing adequate interpretation about this event. Our job, however, is not over. The park will continue to enhance the education and interpretation of the Niagara Movement so that it might gain its rightful place in history.

In August 1906, 45 members of the Niagara Movement, an early civil rights organization, met on the campus of Storer College, in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. This meeting was monumentally and symbolically important since this was their first meeting on American soil. The first meeting of

the Niagara Movement, organized by W.E.B. Du Bois, was held in July 1905, at the Erie Beach Hotel in Ft. Erie, Ontario, Canada. Racial prejudice forced Du Bois to move the meeting to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls when accommodation was refused the group in Buffalo, New York. Harpers Ferry had been carefully selected as the location for the second meeting because of its connection to John Brown and his infamous raid to free slaves in 1859. In fact, the meeting was promoted as “the 100th anniversary of John Brown's birth, and the 50th jubilee of the battle of Ossawatimie.” (Brown was actually born in 1800, making this the 106th anniversary of his birth.)



The connection to the martyred Brown was powerful indeed; but it was not the only connection to African-American history—Harpers Ferry was also home to Storer College. Storer had been opened in 1867 by the Freewill Baptist as a mission school educating former slaves. For 25 years Storer was the only school in West Virginia that offered African Americans an education beyond the primary level. In the ensuing years, Storer expanded

in acreage, curriculum, and enrollment. In 1906, it provided the backdrop for this historic conference.

Convening on the 15th, these 45 men undoubtedly carried strong hopes that their voices would be heard and action would result. Many of the Niagrites, as they were called, were drawn to this organization by common goals and desires. They had tired of Booker T. Washington's theory of "accommodation" and sought to actively seek equality for their race.

It is interesting to note that women attended this conference, but were not officially recognized as members until the third annual conference in Boston, Massachusetts. One of the women in attendance, Mary White Ovington, a reporter, covered the meeting for the *New York Evening Post*. Ms. Ovington had long admired Dr. Du Bois before finally meeting him in 1904. They communicated often and she had suggested that Du Bois invite her to the conference. Ms. Ovington wrote of the participants, "Their power and intellectual ability is manifest on hearing or talking with them." Her interest in the organization and its cause did not end at Harpers Ferry. In 1909, Ms. Ovington became co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Speeches, meetings, and special addresses filled the week at Storer; a highlight for the participants, men and women, was John Brown's Day, August 17—a day devoted to honoring the memory of John Brown. A light rain was falling as the day began with a silent pilgrimage to the site of John Brown's fort. Led by Owen Waller, a physician from Brooklyn, New York, the Niagrites, numbering 100 strong, removed their shoes and socks before treading this hallowed ground. Following prayer and stirring remarks offered by Richard T. Greener, former dean of the Howard University Law School, the assemblage marched, single-file, around the fort singing, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "John Brown's Body". This inspirational morning was followed by an equally stirring afternoon as the Niagrites listened to Henrietta Leary Evans, whose brother and nephew fought

with Brown at Harpers Ferry; Lewis Douglass, son of Frederick Douglass; W.E.B. Du Bois, and Reverdy C. Ransom, pastor of the Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston. Ransom's address was described by many as a masterpiece and according to Benjamin Quarles in *Allies for Freedom* "was the most stirring single episode in the short life of the Niagara Movement."

The second annual conference of the Niagara Movement concluded with an "Address to the Country." Penned by Du Bois, this document was a five-point resolution demanding:

1. ... we want full manhood suffrage, and we want it now, henceforth and forever.
2. We want discrimination in public accommodation to cease. Separation ... is un-American, undemocratic, and silly.
3. We claim the right of freemen to walk, talk, and be with them who wish to be with us.
4. We want the laws enforced...against white as well as black.
5. We want our children educated ... either the U.S. will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the U.S."

The address also stated, "We will not be satisfied to take one jot or title less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil, and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans." With thunderous applause the Harpers Ferry conference drew to a close. Years later, recalling this conference, Du Bois referred to it as ... "one of the greatest meetings that American Negroes ever held."

The Niagara Movement continued until 1911 at which time various factors contributed to its demise. In 1911, Du Bois wrote to his colleagues advising them to join the new National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Niagara, as an organization, ceased to exist, but its principles and ideals that evolved during its years continued to gain momentum into the 21st century as part of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

References

- Lewis, David Levering. *W.E.B. Du Bois Biography of a Race 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1993).
- Quarles, Benjamin, *Allies For Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

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August 24-25, 1996 Harpers Ferry National Historical Park will be commemorating the 90th anniversary of this historic conference. Special guest speakers, including Dr. David Du Bois, son of W.E.B. Du Bois, will present a symposium on this nationally-significant event. During the weekend celebration, a pilgrimage will be made to the Murphy Farm, the site of John Brown's Fort in 1906. This walk will be held to honor the members of the Niagara Movement. For further information, call Harpers Ferry National Historical Park at 304-535-6029.